

Needham Youth Commission History

Beginning

Late in the 1950s, the Community Council of Needham began to express an interest in the activities of the town's teen-aged youth. This interest was not brought about because of any specific youth problems, rather by a desire to establish communication with that rapidly increasing segment of the town's populace, the junior high and high school youth.

As a result, the Community Council consisting of representatives of all organized clubs, youth fellowships, student councils, scouting groups, etc, sponsored a Youth Committee. This committee was advised by a group of interested townspeople including a representative of the Needham High School administration. Meetings of this group were sporadic and its success, if any, was limited. All of the committee members were busy with their own group activities and had little time to devote to this new endeavor.

Youth Study Committee

Many years passed and at the last session of the 1965 Needham Annual Town Meeting, a motion was introduced to establish a Youth Study Committee that was charged to investigate youth activities and programs in the community. This committee consisted of one member each appointed by the Selectmen, Finance Committee, the Park and Recreation Commission, and two members appointed by the Town Moderator. Two high school seniors were also to be appointed by the Superintendent of Schools. At the 1966 Annual Town Meeting the committee was again continued without funds, and charged to continue its work in the establishment of a suitable youth organization in Needham; to participate in the work of this youth organization; and to serve as a liaison between this organization and the town. Further, the committee was directed to report at the next Annual Town Meeting with its recommendations relative to permanent Youth Council for the Town of Needham.

By this time, there was growing concern in the community regarding the behavior of youth in the areas of alcohol use, vandalism to school and private property, fighting, and suspected misuse of narcotics. The Citizens for Needham Youth Committee met weekly through the spring --- frequently involving a significant number of high school youth representing all segments of the older youth of the town. With the approach of the summer, concern mounted over possible delinquent behavior on the part of the unemployed and unoccupied young people, particularly those in the 13 - 16 age group.

Youth Committee Recommendations

In early July of 1966, the Citizens for Needham Youth Committee decided to approach the Finance Committee for a special appropriation of funds to allow for the immediate appointment of a Youth Program Coordinator and his/her expenses. On July 12th representatives of Citizens for Needham Youth Committee and the youth of the town met with the Finance Committee with the following recommendations:

- That a comprehensive and coordinated plan for Needham youth be put into operation to utilize and coordinate any community facilities already in existence to help meet youth problems, and that a coordinator be hired. This person's responsibility would be to contact and outreach to youth, develop and establish programs to involve youth constructively, and to create a socially healthy community in which youth and their parents can be justly proud.
- That youth conditions go far beyond the problem of strict police patrol --- that they require prompt and specific action in order to prevent serious difficulties and certainly to prevent any worsening of the present situation.
- That on the basis of the several studies and surveys of Needham youth conducted by the Citizens of Needham Youth Committee, a serious condition exists for the present summer months in particular as well as the entire year.

New Problems & Solutions

The Finance Committee turned down this proposal on the grounds that town funds were not available for such a program. Although the Citizens for Needham Youth Committee sponsored a few activities during the summer months, there was still an obvious increase in drinking, theft, shoplifting, car stealing, and vandalism during the summer months. It also came to the attention of the Citizens for Needham Youth Committee that some involvement with narcotics might be taking place among some of the older teenage group. By September, the Citizens for Needham Youth Committee had formed several sub-committees with equal numbers of adult and youth representatives. One sub-committee was at work compiling a directory and calendar of activities for youth organizations and activities, another was developing the rationale for the hiring of a youth worker, and another was also exploring the possibility of opening one or more drop-in centers. An Adult-Youth Communications Committee was also meeting regularly to inspire dialogue between the older and younger citizens on matters of mutual concern.

Word was spreading in the Needham community, and the Ministerial Association expressed an interest and came forth with an offer of support in September for a full-time youth worker and a program, however, there was no funding available and nothing came of this offer. Shortly thereafter, another community effort resulted in the formation of Youth Council which would work with the Citizens for Needham Youth Committee in furthering the cause of a coordinated youth program.

Quest for a Permanent Youth Commission & Full-Time Youth Coordinator

From this point in October, the movement for a coordinated youth program took shape rapidly. It was decided that articles should be inserted in the warrant of the 1967 Annual Town Meeting asking for the creation of a permanent Youth Commission and a full-time Youth Coordinator. Letters were sent to all town organizations, clubs, official boards, fraternal groups, youth groups, church groups, etc. to inform them of the Youth Commission proposal and to let them know that speakers were available to discuss this proposal. From November until March 1967, adult and youth speakers made presentations to over seventy groups.

Members of the the Citizens for Needham Youth Committee also visited the towns of Arlington, Brookline, Medfield, Wayland, Cohasset, and Scituate to gather information on their town-wide youth programs. In all of these communities it had been found that sustaining a coordinated youth program had been especially difficult when volunteer assistance was the primary source of staffing. Some of these towns had appointed full-time youth workers; others were following Needham's proposal with interest as they were contemplating establishing a similar service in their community.

By February 1967, it had been learned that the warrant articles to fund a position would be opposed by the Finance Committee and Taxpayer's Association. A budget of approximately \$15,000 had been proposed and the Finance Committee and Taxpayer's Association took the position that the creation of such a department represented an unnecessary expense. The Selectmen suspected that this would be the beginning of a program that would ultimately lead to a proposed \$250,000 Youth Center.

On a community level, many citizens in the town voiced approval of the Youth Commission idea. However, they spoke for no organized agencies or boards and it appeared that the cards were stacked against the Youth Committee's proposal. On Sunday evening, March 5th the Citizens for Needham Youth Committee sponsored a presentation to explain their proposal. Small group meetings were held chaired by Citizens for Needham Youth Committee members and involved leading adults and youths of the town. The program was attended by close to 800 adults and young people and was enthusiastically received.

Article 49 Passed

The two "youth articles" in the town warrant opened the discussion at the third session of the

Annual Town Meeting on March 27. After two and one-half hours of heated debate, Article 49 to create the Youth Coordinator and a \$12,000 budget for the balance of 1967 drew the greatest opposition. No town group that had offered support presented speakers on these articles. Therefore, it was up to the Citizens of Needham Youth Committee and the youth themselves to present their case. Finally, a representative from the Needham Taxpayer's Association moved the question. This motion carried closing debate and the town meeting members voted 124 to 123 to approve. Following a fifteen-minute recess, a Taxpayer's Association member moved reconsideration. This motion carried and the article was reopened for discussion. At the conclusion of his comments, the Taxpayer's Association member again moved the question. This motion carried and the Article was put to a 129 to 116 vote thus passing.

Final Details

This issue was one of the most interesting and most controversial debates to take place at a Needham Annual Town Meeting in years. Unfortunately, the appointing agencies, particularly the Moderator and Finance Committee moved slowly to create the Youth Commission and appointments were not completed until early August. The Youth Commission then advertised the position of Youth Coordinator, interviewed candidates and selected Mr. J. Robert Griffith as the town's first Youth Coordinator. Mr. Griffith took office December 1st and moved ahead to establish a coordinated youth program.

Perhaps the most reassuring sign of all occurred without notice in March of that year when budgets for the coming fiscal year were being crafted --- the budget of \$20,000 for the Youth Commission passed Town Meeting without comment or opposition.